

Paranoia, Not Security

Not content with secrecy agreements that bind intelligence agents and code specialists, the Reagan Administration has elevated its campaign against information leaks to fantastic heights. A new program would force 113,000 more handlers of classified information to obtain advance Government approval for any speech or article, delivered now or years from now, that deals in any degree with a Government secret. The contracts would cover the Government workers for life.

Last week the Administration also heartily endorsed the idea of giving random lie-detector tests to all Federal employees with access to classified data. Even if polygraph examinations fall short of scientific perfection, a Justice Department official explains, they serve admirably to deter potential leakers.

Congress finally seems nervous about the President's surrender to zealots, who have yet to demonstrate that greater secrecy is needed to enhance security. The Senate has voted to hold up the censorship plan, and Congress has postponed a sweeping Pentagon plan for systematic lie-detector checks until at least next April. The legislators are right to be nervous.

The censorship scheme would seriously inhibit public discussion of the most vital public issues. It would restrict the contributions of experienced national security officials to that discussion. It would probably discourage some leading citizens from accepting public service.

It would mean that a former Air Force Secre-

tary, for example, could not submit an article for publication criticizing a successor until a censor — working for that successor — cleared the work. Even private citizens working for, say, Henry Kissinger's commission on Central America might be forced to accept lifetime censorship as the price of access to intelligence information.

As for lie detectors, they detect excitement, not lies. Their accuracy varies with the emotional state of the subject and the skill of the operator. They are most useful in the highly specialized interrogation that may occur toward the end of a criminal case, when the operator already knows what questions are most pertinent. The machines can falsely incriminate merely nervous individuals and they have been known to exonerate pathological liars or tricksters taking depressant drugs.

As the Justice official acknowledges, however, the machines don't merely measure fear. They create it. And that is what the Administration aims to spread — in an entire class of trusted public servants whom it would regularly expose to an annual integrity lottery.

Only the most extraordinary crisis could justify that kind of intimidation in American government. Yet the Reagan Administration does not even argue, much less prove, that secrecy breaches are now measurably greater than before or that news reports or commentary by former public officials are compromising security.

How this intimidation and censorship would enhance security, in other words, is not at all clear. How they would undermine freedom of speech and respect for government should be obvious.